Coe College
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Baccalaureate Commencement Address

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John M. Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

PROVISIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Some things never change. Come May and June, year in - year out, one generation gathers and tries to find appropriate words to say to the next generation; as yet another younger generation fidgets, wiggles in pews, on folding chairs and generally laments the length and sobriety of the whole exercise. The older ones - the audience, as it were - sit up and take notice. Having had the unusual opportunity of sitting there as a parent and standing here as a Baccalaureate preacher - an equal number of times - my sense is that they are the ones paying the most attention. They have a very great deal invested - of their hope, and love and cash. They are filled today with pride and relief. They will reach for hankies a lot today: they'll touch hands and pat one another today without having to say a thing. They've done it... maybe the most important thing they ever did or ever will do. They're feeling like they've launched the future... and it's you... and they're feeling pretty good about the whole enterprise. The supporting cast for this drama, the faculty and administration of the institution, are also proud and relieved. They hope you have paid your bills: they will follow you, be watching with attentiveness as your lives unfold. They'll be very pleased if you remember their names. And you, the actors in the drama - the principles for whom all this hoopla is arranged - you're excited and pleased, as proud as you normally allow yourselves to be; maybe a little humble and even grateful, uncertain, frightened. And, I do recall, very distracted.

It's one of those occasions that looms a little larger than life... and a lot larger than anyone's ability to speak meaningfully to it. Some things never change. Garrison Keilor told a graduating class a few years ago that the one thing they could always count on in this life was their parents' worrying. He was right, of course. They always have worried about you. They always will. In fact, right now they're worrying whether, underneath those robes you are properly pressed, tucked in, and have a clean handkerchief in your pocket. I've been there. I know they're worried about whether you have socks on. They may even be worried about what you have under those robes with you. Some things never change.

But some things do, and while part of this exercise today is as predictable as long speeches and a champagne cork popping at an inopportune moment later this afternoon, the other part of this exercise is about change.

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Unprecedented change in the world. No one anticipated the changes that happened and are happening politically. It was just a year ago that the students began to gather in Tiananmen Square; seven months ago that the wall began to open; six months ago that the candles filled Wenceslas Square in Prague; four months ago that the people of Timisoara said no to tyranny; three months ago that Nelson Mandela was in jail. We are living this morning in a very different world from the one we were living in a year ago. No one - not the intelligencea community, the academic community - anticipated it. And thrilled as we are, thoughtful people are also wary. Change is frightening - risky.

And so, among the gifts we trust your education has given you for the journey, we pray is adaptability, creativity - the ability to live purposefully with enormous unpredictability.

You know far more about technological change than we do, of course. You adapted to word processing more quickly than we adjusted to automatic transmission and pop-up toasters. Some of us still have to wait until you come home from college to reset our digital watches and show us how to "record" on the VCRs you persuaded us to purchase.

Seven years after Megatrends swept the nation, John Naisbett and Patricia Aburdene published an up-date, Megatrends 2,000, Ten New Directions for the 1990s. The opening sentences set the pace.

> "We stand at the dawn of a new era. Before us is the most important decade in the history of civilization, a period of stunning technological innovation, unprecedented economic opportunity, surprising political reform, and great cultural rebirth. It will be a decade like none that has come before." [p. 11]

That's quite an assertion - "the most important decade in the history of civilization." Even after allowances for graduation-day hyperbole, that's still quite an assertion. No wonder you, we - maybe we more than you - are worried, uncertain, anxious.

A journey begins for you and for all of us today and its outcome is not at all clear.

#4

That, I propose to you this morning, is not unlike one of the most consistent motifs in the tradition of Judeo-Christian religion, The Biblical tradition.

The story is about people moving from security to freedom, from certainty to riskiness, from predictability to happiness, from safety to salvation. That's the story from the beginning.

Think of it, the prototypes, Adam and Eve, mother and father of us all, get kicked out of the garden, where everything is safe and secure and predictable. Human history starts when their security ends. Now traditionally that story is evidence of God's displeasure at their

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disobedience, but the best of our theologians have always suspected that there isn't room in the Garden of Eden for human history: that human beings have to take charge, start making decisions - including some very bad ones; have to be thrown out of paradise before they can be whole and happy and saved. God, the old story reminds us, not only throws them out, God knits them garments for life outside paradise.

And then, in what Biblical scholarship knows is the primal Bible story, Abraham and Sarah, elderly, settled, stable, hear a voice that says something preposterous: "Go from your country and your kindred, and your parents' house to the land I will show you."

Can you imagine the day they tried to explain that to the neighbors? Abraham is seventy-five. He and Sarah have no children. They have lived in one place for fifty years. They are comfortable: up at 7:00 for coffee and the newspaper at 7:30; walk the dog at 8:00, lunch, nap, cocktails, dinner, TV till bedtime, the buffet at the club on Thursday. Can you imagine the day Sarah and Abraham tell their neighbors they are selling their place, having a garage sale, cashing in their C.D.'s and leaving?

#4 (cont)

- "Where are you going, Abraham? To a retirement village?"

- "Well, actually not. Actually we don't know where we're going. We're headed for the promised land, but we really don't know where it is. So we're trusting God to show us and to provide for us. And we hate to bring it up, but we're expecting that sometime soon, Sarah's going to be pregnant. So we'll be parents, not just of a child, but an entire nation. That's a whole other story! Anyway, we're out-of here."

Think about what that primal story is saying about human life and about God and about what we really need for the journey.

Think about the assertion - the breathtaking assertion - that the creator God, the one who calls being out of nothingness, form out of chaos, penetrates history and human enterprise and calls people to get up and move; the assertion that God's reality is accessible not merely in history - tradition - custom - but the future; that God's reality is not pushing us from behind, but out ahead, pulling us into the future. Think about that incredible theological assertion that God is making new and unlikely things happen: that God expects people not to be too settled, to be mobile enough to respond. This is, the story will tell us, a peculiar God who prefers tents to buildings; a God who is suspicious of temples and religion because temple religion has a way of becoming so tied up in its traditions, it forgets about God, a God who likes to be on the way - in the wilderness with the people; a God who promises to provide love and courage sufficient enough for the journey.

in the Exodus and in the Exile when - to my narrative #5 legal part "when God calls ...

It emerges again, generations later. This time it's a loose confederation of tribes, descendants of Sarah and Abraham. They've been living in Egypt for several generations. They have settled there; thrived, prospered so much that the Egyptians get worried and start turning them into slaves - making bricks for Pharoh's ambitious construction projects.

Moses organizes them, presents their demands to Pharoh, negotiates, threatens Pharoh relentlessly. And one night under the cover of darkness, they gather the sheep and cattle, get the children and old folk organized, look around at the old neighborhood one last time and walk into the wilderness...

And start to complain. Egypt wasn't all that bad. As a matter of fact, Egypt was home: had been home all their lives, and their parents before them and their grandparents before them. It might look like slavery to a young radical like Moses, but it is also home. They're barely out of Egypt when they start to complain.

"There's no water out here in the wilderness; no houses - not even a Red Roof Inn. At least we had a roof over our heads and food on the table in Egypt.

"It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness," they murmur.

Sometimes uncertainty is so frightening we toy with the idea of settling for security - even if it is limiting and oppressing.

Bruno Bettleheim, who died two months ago, was a pioneer in research and treatment of autistic children.

In his popular book, The Uses of Enchantment, he wrote about the psychological importance of fairy tales, noting how many of them express this dynamic. He observed:

"In many fairy tales, being pushed out of home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of home, an excruciatingly painful experience fraught with many psychological dangers." Bettleheim taught that the experience happens at every stage in life, not simply childhood.

He had been a prisoner at Dachau. Later he wrote a controversial essay for the New Yorker in which he suggested that the people who survived the concentration camps were the ones who lived for something more than security, their own comfort and predictability: that is, those who lived for more than survival. Human life, he observed, becomes something less than human when the oppressor manages to reduce it to a struggle to find the next meal, the next drink of water.

It is a universal human theme. There is a sense in which life is always calling us to leave security behind if we are to do and be all we can: a sense in which life is diminished to the degree it is focused only on the provision of comfort and security. You inherit a culture that seems at times utterly obsessed with its own comfort; a culture so hooked on materialism, on what George Carlin calls accumulating "your stuff," that its epitaph is characterized in that infamous BMW bumper sticker - "The One With The Most Toys Wins."

The issue has to do with our development and maturity as human beings. It has to do with our living life to its fullest. It has to do

with creativity and accomplishment. Playwright Neil Simon said that it is always very risky business to express oneself creatively in the arts, business, professionally and relationally. But, said Simon, the possibilities are enormous. Had Michelangelo been afraid of taking chances he would have painted the Sistine floor and it would have been rubbed out long ago.

And this we must not miss - this issue has to do with faith: with living in good faith with the one who created us, has given us life, and calls us to live with integrity and purpose and courage.

God, in all these stories, comes to people in the wilderness, on the journey. It's almost as if you have to be in some kind of wilderness, which means vulnerable, dependent, in order for God to break in. The great mystics knew that, knew that to experience God you have to let go of everything else... not an easy lesson for people who have a lot to begin with. Henri Nouwen, who writes beautifully about spirituality, says that you can't pray with your fists clenched: you have to open your hands; let go of what you own - let go of your familiarities and securities; and acknowledge your emptiness, your hunger and thirst.

The old stories suggest that what lies ahead is not randomness and luck and chance, but a journey to which God calls you. The old stories suggest that when we let go of the securities upon which we have become dependent and trust God, we will become the free and whole human beings God has created us to be.

And the story makes a very daring promise. **God will provide.** God will give us the resources we need for the journey. Not necessarily what we want, but what we need: water for our thirst; living water for that deeper thirst inside every one of us; confidence to take chances; courage to live with uncertainty; grace to give ourselves to those we love; and peace, in the certainty that we are not alone, not ever.

"The threshold of religion," someone said recently, "is at that point when the thirsty soul stands squarely in front of the hopeless, barren desert, the seemingly impossible."

So for each of us comes a day when we must leave security behind, a day like the one years ago when we walked out the door and down the sidewalk, away from the insular safety of home on the way to school and began the adventure of becoming, the journey that is still going on...

- or the day twelve or so years later when our parents dropped us off at college and drove away.

- or the day when we find ourselves standing in the front of a church, with a relative stranger and without much preparation actually, make a breathtaking commitment, "...for better or worse, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live."

- or later when the company downsizes, realigns management, and we find ourselves in the wilderness of unemployment or an unplanned second career.

Oh, the places you will go! Like Dr. Seuss, W. H. Auden thought about the journey and at the end of his "Christmas Oratorio," wrote what I think are among the most hauntingly beautiful lines . . .

"He is the way
Follow Him through the Land of
Unlikeness
You will see rare beasts,
and have unique adventures.

"He is the truth.
Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety,
You will come to a great city
that has expected your return for years.
"He is the life.
Love Him in the world of the flesh.
And at your marriage all its occasions
shall dance with joy."

Jesus said,

"Come . . . Follow me . . ."

Amen.

insert the opening text from Isaiah 1: 11 "Prepare your procession"